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Interiority and Authenticity: A Glossed Medieval History about Music and the Taste for Apples

Part of the journal section "Forum: Falling into Medievalism"

Eyolf Østrem, "Interiority and Authenticity: A Glossed Medieval History about Music and the Taste for Apples"

The article is an attempt at balancing between historical relativism and a fact-based historiography, with a point of departure in a theoretical discussion of the relationship between history and experience, and the author's personal experience of the Middle Ages, in search of an answer to the question: "Does it matter what the music of the Middle Ages sounded like when it was made?"

When my father was young (The Middle Ages have to start *somewhere*), he learned the gothic letter forms from an old hymnal. He passed them on to me during our Easter holiday skiing trips - with a ski pole,

Happy Easter

was carved into Existence (represented by the snow-covered mountain which, like Existence itself, seemed to stretch farther than the eye could see). I carried with me the interest in lettering, perhaps because my handwriting, being left-handed, was decidedly ugly, and I wanted to compensate in some way or another.

I remember a book which emerged from the ground under the school house (built in 1905, the same year when the union with Sweden was dissolved, in other words: the year of origin of the country in which I was living) when the toilets were renovated; I must have been ten. The book was old as the earth itself, surely from the nineteenth century, it definitely was the oldest book I had ever seen, and it was written with gothic letters; perhaps that's when they started, the Middle Ages?

As a history student in Oslo in the mid-eighties, I therefore turned to calligraphy. I trawled the city book stores and eventually found a set of pens and in the library an old, dusty introduction to the art of Lettering, written by Edward Johnston.

A lot has happened since then: for a while, it was virtually impossible to get hold of pens which were *not* calligraphic. One can now get *children's books* with an introduction to medieval scripts, complete with four broad-nibbed felt pens in different colours, in a glossy plastic case.

Also in other areas the Middle Ages have struck back. Back in the eighties, I came across a recording with some strange songs to a contemplative organ accompaniment, but to find out more about it, was next to impossible. The singers were monks, for certain, and the name "Citeaux" on the cover gave associations of something age-old; I imagined an unbroken tradition, a thousand years back in time. A few years later, the collection by the benedictine monks of Silos in Spain became a hit of sorts, and it was no longer difficult to find material about gregorian chant. I also eventually found out that the organ accompaniment was written in the twentieth century.

There is a story about a Norwegian professor teaching Italian, who, in the early eighties was asked for advice about a certain book: there were plans for a Norwegian edition, and the publishers wanted an expert opinion. The professor thought it would only be of limited interest for a narrow public. The publishers still decided to publish it. The book was Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*.

Why this introduction? What do my personal reflections upon my growing, post-pubertal record collection have to do with anything? The meaning is to introduce some of the topics that will be emphasised further ahead, so that the reader, without being fully aware of it, is prepared already from the start. This method is itself an expression of the same attitude towards history: that the integration between individual, existence, and history makes it impossible to separate the one from the other, so that the question whether this is a personal history or a history about the early eighties, becomes fairly meaningless; the histories, the way they are presented, become a web of references, where the appropriation of the Middle Ages in a personal project, the loss of the innocent gaze upon existence in the early adult age (or perhaps existence's loss of innocence during the depressing eighties), and the fundamentally historical character of language, slide over and into each other.

The introduction can be concretized in three questions:

What has happened to the Middle Ages since the eighties, and why has it happened?

What has it happened *to*? Me? Time? or the Middle Ages themselves?

Why is medieval music important, and does it also matter how it sounds?

The discovery of the Middle Ages

That history is created at any time by the present which looks at its past, is either a truism - e.g. for "postmodernists", "culture relativists", and "leftist historians", or a red herring - e.g. for those who put the former labels on their adversaries, and who claim that "We Create History" is sloppy language and fear the dissolution of norms and fragmentation of values as the necessary consequence of the constructivists' renunciation of truth as a criterion.

It is less problematic to claim that the image of the Middle Ages has been formed and used in different ways at different times, more depending on the contemporary situation than on the Middle Ages that are being studied. The Middle Ages have been central for the formation of such constructions since the eighteenth century, and in that sense one might say that the changes have happened to the Middle Ages themselves. The difference between the two standpoints is not whether different images of the Middle

Ages *can* be constructed, but whether the Middle Ages can at all be anything *other than* a construction which must be appropriated - thus: does there exist a Middle Ages which is immune to changes and constructions?

Again, an opposition between the positivist's and the relativist's attitudes can be sketched, in a form which may well be schematical and presumably do not exist in pure form, but which indicate different emphases. The Positivist says: By renouncing the factual as the basis for historical presentations, we also renounce the only criterion there is for security to our claims, and the field is open to nazi revisionists.

Against this, the relativist may say: A relativist historiography takes history *more* seriously than a positivist one, because it is conscious of what historical writing is all about: concept formation and identity. In such a perspective, an "historical" truth, however true it proves to be, becomes meaningless and futile, if it is not in some way or other drawn into and related to the wealth of sensual impressions, memories and narratives which otherwise form our view on existence, but remains extra-individual. "Truth" and "historicity" become false warrants of value, and the responsibility lies on the positivist to explain why we should spend time and energy on scrutinizing the ink in medieval manuscripts.

The two attitudes can be concretized in two different approaches to the appropriation of history, which I will call *interiority* and *authenticity*. The concept pair is coined based on certain tendencies in the Early Music movement, where authenticity has been a positive keyword which has implied objectivity and historical correctness. At the same time, medieval music has been used in connections which are far from emphasising historicity and correctness, but rather personal, emotional interiority. In this form, the concepts are seemingly in opposition, representing the subjective and individual vs. the objective, collective. On the one hand the intensive emotionality which takes what it wants and uses it at will, and lets the mood of candlelight, the excitement of knights and princesses, or the freedom to improvise freely over simple troubadour tunes, accompanied by arabian drums and tibetan fifes and unfettered by the demands on style that a living tradition would have imposed, become the essential thing about the Middle Ages, regardless of whether that was how it *actually* was. On the other hand the insistent search for the authentic medieval expression, for traces of factual information, objective truth, and *verloren gegangene Selbstverständlichkeiten* - a wonderful German expression - among the scant sources.

The following is an attempt to illustrate the problem of the appropriation of history (my appropriation of history? Yes, in a way. History's appropriation of me? Yes, in a way.) starting with my own discovery of the Middle Ages, of the only Middle Ages I know anything about. The vantage point must therefore be in Norway, and it must be about music.

Different Middle Ages

Musically speaking, the Middle Ages have a relatively short history. In the early twentieth century, enthusiasts in England and Germany started to explore medieval music as something more than archival sources and precursors (to *real* music, i.e. Bach). The two main directions that I have outlined above, a player's emotional one and an academic's authentic one, have interacted since then, during the entire twentieth century, and the outcome of this interaction has varied, depending on which of the directions has dominated and on which other elements have influenced the development.

In England, Arnold Dolmetsch (1858-1940) was central in the establishment of a contemporary performance practice for Early Music. Dolmetsch was an instrument builder by profession, and with this background, paired with a glowing interest in early music, he worked all his life with studies of notation and of sources concerning interpretation, with reconstructions of old instrument types, and with new performances of the old works.

Dolmetsch was mainly interested in instrumental music from the Baroque period, but his work has been of great importance for the surge of interest in the music of the Middle Ages, especially since the 1960s. This part of the Early music movement can to a large extent be placed in a counter-cultural frame, at times with strong escapist features. In her "Saga of a Twentieth-Century Lute Pioneer", a biographical study of the Dolmetsch student Diana Poulton written down in 1969, Suzanne Bloch writes:

She and her husband Tom [...] lived in Heyshott in a wonderful little thatched-roof cottage with a garden full of herbs and flowers and a tame magpie named Jack. Diana kept goats that she milked and she made her own cheese. This extraordinary down-to-earth way of living made a great impression on me. It was like a dream, away from the materialistic way of life that threatened to get worse and worse.

Almost verbatim, we find the same kind of description in a review of the Silos monks' chant album:

The singing is light, innocent, beautiful. Listening to it, you are transported to the peace of a sun-warmed, stone-built monastery, where nothing is hurried, nothing is rushed, all is faith and all is God. God in his/her most innocent, gentle state. The voices are the echoes of childhood faith, like grown-up choirboys [...]. I put this CD on my player, and it was as if all the stupid worries and stresses of the modern world had just faded away. My town apartment was transformed into a cloister. The passing traffic was a flock of birds. The surrounding buildings, a herb garden tended [by] my gentle hands. I became ashamed of my hurly-burly, couldn't-care-less, not-a-minute-to-think modern life. What has happened to our soul? (<http://www.westnet.com/consumable/1995/May08.1995/revmonk.html>)

In the 1970s, Early Music was a democratic thing. One sought to remove the distance between performer and audience: raised podiums, tails, and white wine in the intermission, begone! The specialization to one particular instrument, mastered to virtuosic perfection, in the classical tradition, met the challenge of simpler dance tunes performed by multi-instrumentalists who were equally skilled - or un-skilled - on bagpipe as on recorder, hurdy-gurdy, drum, buck horn, or lute, and who could top it off by singing a song if necessary.

Parallel with this direction runs another with stronger academic demands on correctness, and with the element of personal interpretation consciously downplayed. Partly, this happened in reaction against the "interior" direction, but it is also an independent line of development in its own right. The connection with academic circles has been stronger. Friedrich Blume (1893-1975), professor in musicology in Kiel, relates how, in 1927, he was asked by a student if they could try to sing Josquin's *Missa Pange lingua*, which the student had transcribed himself. They did, and the Early Music movement was born.

Within this movement, authenticity has been a key word. One has sought the authentic musical expression of an earlier age, formulated with varying degrees of strictness, from a demand of exact correspondence with the sources, however precise or imprecise they may be, to a humble wish of being

able to play in such a manner that the masters of earlier ages might, if not cheer wildly at the performance, then at least nod in benevolent recognition.

These descriptions are both parodying, of course, by cultivating one single aspect to a degree that has rarely occurred in reality, even though they emphasise features which will be easily recognizable to most who have been involved with early music. In practice, however, it is more difficult to draw a sharp line between them. Research was central both to Dolmetsch and to his successors, and the term "authenticity" the way it used here, comes from Dolmetsch. Correspondingly, the direction more strictly oriented towards authenticity has had elements that have gone way beyond the search for historical correctness. In his book *The Modern Invention of Medieval Music*, which discusses this direction of the Early Music movement in England, Daniel Leech-Wilkinson has described how the authentically correct interpretation was sought with religious fervour, like a question of faith.

You shall know the Truth and the Truth shall set you free (John, 8. 32).

Norwegian Middle Ages, 1814-1989

Was I the only one who at that particular time discovered that the Middle Ages were important? Why precisely the Middle Ages? What did it represent? Which values? Or was it precisely *that* it represented values?

All historians have discovered history at the threshold to adult age.

In the Norwegian context, the general image - typical of our time - of the Middle Ages as a counterweight to alienation, Reaganism, value nihilism, complexity, and cultural stratification, be modified by the ambiguous position the Middle Ages have in Norwegian history. Not only does it stand for simplicity and originality - the Middle Ages are also Norway's only real golden age, the time when the country had influence and power at a level which was never again reached, until the winter olympics in Albertville in 1992.

The middle of the thirteenth century is written into all Norwegian history books as the culmination of the Norwegian empire: at that time, "we" controlled a North-Atlantic empire from Greenland to Gothenburg; culturally we were fully on the level with our continental peers.

But then things went worse, and they went fast. The Black Death in 1349 struck hard, and towards the end of the Middle Ages, there was not much left of former greatness. The year 1536 is deeply symbolic: the union with Denmark, which dated back to 1387, culminated with the decree in king Christian III's royal oath that Norway shall "henceforth neither be nor be called a kingdom of its own, but a part of the kingdom of Denmark and under the Danish crown, to eternity".

The same year saw the start of the Lutheran reformation in Denmark. The breach with the catholic tradition has been important in the formation of a Norwegian nationality in the nineteenth century; the illegitimate King Sverre, who "spoke straight against Rome" because he claimed his right to the throne according to established *Norwegian* laws, even though he did not fulfill the newfangled, un-Norwegian demands from the *church* about legitimate birth, was written into the national anthem. But the breach also carries with it a deep dilemma for the understanding of Norwegian medieval history, because it

ends up in a position alternating between heaven and hell: the Golden Age, but at the same time a period that is strongly tied to precisely the two institutions that have been unwanted: the catholic church and the Danish state.

Remove the ecclesiastical sources and culture sphere from the picture of the Middle Ages, and there is not much left. Snorri, the Edda, Hávamál, skaldic poetry - sure enough, true expressions of genuine, straightforward Norwegian-ness, but as "recent scholarship" has pointed out for a long time, they are all deeply influenced by Christian thinking in some way or another.

Likewise with the "four hundred years' night" under Danish rule. The sphere where one might have searched for a cultural life of the continental kind was weak in Norway, hence, there has been little or no interest in looking for such a culture in a predominantly Danish class of crown officials. Norwegian history begins again - after the separation from a golden age which, through the national humiliation which one would rather forget, stands outside history - in 1814, with the separation from Denmark and the declaration of the Constitution at Eidsvoll on the seventeenth of May. Thus, the whole tradition of production and consumption of art in church, court, and bourgeois circles, which has been the framework for the reintroduction of medieval music on the modern concert stage, has been put on hold in a Norwegian context.

The only thing that remains to bridge the gap between original but faded greatness, and resuscitation and fulfillment, is the *people*. That the national emancipation in Norway took place concurrently with the "discovery of the people" throughout Europe, is a truism rather than a surprise, but it is nevertheless possible that this merging of emancipation and medievalism may illuminate some of the peculiarities one may observe in the Norwegian relationship with history. As in the quotes above, the Middle Ages will often stand for simplicity, but in a Norwegian context, this simplicity is combined with a notion of the people as the bearer of national grandeur. This popular simplicity is then elevated to a national virtue (hence the obtrusive humility which seems to be such a dominant feature of modern Norwegian-ness).

Since the Norwegian always has carried with him the Original, the Innocent, the Pure, the Genuine, we have not needed any other medieval music than the one we already have in folk music. Norwegian medieval music has, until a few years ago, meant performances with roots in folk music traditions. The group *Kalenda Maya* was for a long time the only Norwegian ensemble for medieval music which was widely known; they consist of folk musicians, whose interpretations are dominated by an instrumentarium which is inspired by various folk music traditions, and a singing style which is based on local Norwegian singing styles.

In later years, the spectrum has widened. *Trio medieval* have, even though they also employ folk musical elements, primarily tied to the English, "authentic", tradition, not the least through their collaborations with the *Hilliard Ensemble*, and gladly cross the borders between Early Music and music belonging to modern, classical genres. The *Modus centre for medieval music* have strong ties to French traditions, with an emphasis on chant. Both ensembles thus connect to spheres that have been "un-Norwegian": the Catholic Church and the bourgeois concert culture.

There could be many reasons for such a change of orientation. It seems to be an expression of a redefinition of the relationship with "the people", when the farming culture in the countryside no longer feels essential to city dwellers with their perspective more on New York than on Old Norway. The

discussions about the European Union have also - in spite of a "no" answer in the referendum and the consolidation of the notion of the "Different country" - brought with it an increased approximation to continental culture, if only because the question of what we are different from has become more pressing.

My Norwegian medieval history ends in 1989, the last year of the depressing eighties (and, incidentally, the year when I left Norway and moved to Sweden).

Interiority and Authenticity

I have indicated some tendencies in various approaches to the weighing between authenticity and interiority and suggested some interpretations and implications of this. In my parodying description of them, none of the positions appear as particularly attractive. If an "interiorised" Middle Ages inclines towards escapism and romantic revery, and an "authentic" Middle Ages will never escape neither its modern ideological limits nor the simple fact that there are no authentic listeners, and therefore ends up groping for its object (of veneration) in thin air, what remains? Is there at all any reason to engage in questions like how the music may have sounded way back when?

Three music experiences:

I remember hearing the Beatles. To me it represented something "old". No, it *was* old - they had already split up and belonged to history.

My youngest son asked me, when he was five, if it was Mozart who died on the cross.

Rarely, the sensation of the concurrent nearness and distance of history has been stronger than when I first heard Perotinus.

It might be that both interiority and authenticity are needed in the appropriation of history: information which principally lies outside us must be internalized - we must appropriate history in order to give it meaning - but it must also be "true". Not in the metaphysical sense, and not as a warrant of aesthetical quality, but as a control parameter for the interconnections within the web of intricate lines and connections in meaning between the things we experience and hear about. This web is principally limitless and open in all directions, and it is not given to us, as individuals, to decide where in the web a breach is important and where it is not.

Existence as a whole is relatively (no: absolutely) difficult to take in, so we will instead imagine - as a radical thought experiment, which both in form and content is influenced by Wittgenstein's discussion of the concept of meaning in his *Philosophical Investigations* - a simple world with a monolinear history, which only comprises myself and my closest ancestors: Adam, Benjamin, Christopher, Daniel, and Eyolf. We will also imagine a line of transmission where each person in the chain gets everything he knows about what has happened before him from those of the forefathers who are still alive, and without any other influence from the outside. Under these conditions, all I, as the last member of the chain, will know about Adam and events in his days, will come directly or indirectly (within the chain of transmission) from Adam.

Adam loved apples. He told this to Benjamin and Christopher directly, and Daniel knew it through Benjamin's vivid stories to his five-year-old grandson about how great-grandpa devoured one delicious fruit after the other.

If we furthermore imagine that every person's understanding of reality consists of the sum of experiences and transmitted history, it would be unimaginable that I should *consciously* revise history and say that "Adam loved pears". Under the preconditions of the system, history, which I only know through the transmission in the chain, forms the one leg upon which my understanding of reality rests.

But the relationship between history and experience can also shift, as in the following situations: (1) Daniel has not told me anything about apples or pears; thus, I am entirely dependent upon the other leg of my understanding of reality - experience - to form a judgement about the taste of apples. (2) He has told me, but I have never tasted neither apples nor pears. As opposed to the first situation, history is here the only source for my sense of reality. Apples and pears do not exist, except as "mythological" concepts; they have a place in my reality only insofar as historical knowledge can be incorporated in the store of knowledge based on experience: *as if* it were, but without being correlatable to own experiences. (3) He has told me, but I have forgotten. Oranges may now be the favoured fruit, so the information is irrelevant. (4) I know that Adam liked apples, but I can't stand them myself, either because my taste organs work differently than Adam's, or because apples actually taste differently today than in Adam's day.

These situations correspond with certain key situations in the (modern) history of Early Music: (1) We have historical objects but no tradition for interpreting them. This was the case when Dolmetsch began his work, but fundamentally it is a situation which the Early Music movement is always faced with - even today when the movement is strong. It is reasonable to regard the painstaking efforts to find the authentically correct as an attempt to recreate a lost tradition, but the radical breach in the historical tradition emphasises how much more the "re-discoveries" have to do with recent history than with the Middle Ages. This point is similarly illustrated by the situation I have described earlier concerning the Norwegian Middle Ages.

(2) A repertory is figuring indirectly in the tradition, but there is no direct access to it, like when there has been a breach in the transmission on some point, and things which have been important preconditions for some phenomenon, have fallen out of the chain, but the phenomenon itself has been retained. Still for a composer like Bach the strict church style in the tradition from Palestrina was of great importance as a part of the stylistic horizon of understanding against which his music was written, even in the cases where he diverged strongly from it. The question is, if we at all can understand Bach's music without having this background ourselves; the answer we can, again, only give by being specific about *which* Bach it is that we understand or not, and how important it is for the understanding of 2005-Bach that 1750-Bach possibly is incomprehensible.

(3) There are historical objects, but no interest in them. Johannes Tinctoris writes in his *Liber de arte contrapuncti* from 1477 that "nothing has been written until the last forty years which is considered worthy of hearing by the learned" (Neque [...] quippiam compositum nisi citra annos quadraginta extat, quod auditu dignum ab eruditis existimetur). With only a handful of exceptions, Tinctoris's judgement is valid until the late eighteenth century, when there was for the first time some interest in musics of earlier periods. In other words, the breach in tradition is the normal situation in music history.

(4) We have both the repertory and the interpretational keys, but our criteria for judgement do not fit the ones that have been transmitted. The simplest, but also the most fundamental criticism of the ideal of authenticity has been that it is bound to fail: even if it came to the point where we could produce the exact same sounds as Bach did, in exactly the same way, there would still not be any authentic listeners around to hear them. A C major chord "tastes" differently today than in Palestrina's days. The quest for the authentic expression entails, beyond the attempt to rediscover the taste, also the presumably unsurmountable problem of "de-learning" the interpretational keys which don't fit.

The system as it is described here, is a simplification, but through the simplification, the fundamentally historical character of concept formation itself is emphasised. The situations in (1) and (2) are the extremes in how the place of history in this process is viewed - either completely absent or completely dominant - but what the experiment and the examples from the history of Early Music are intended to show is that all concept formation contains elements of the two: historical knowledge can be internalized, interiorized, only to the extent that it finds its place in a wider conceptual system, which is never the exclusive domain of a single language user. Any concept is fundamentally historical, in the sense that it comes from the outside, as a guest, into the life of the individual language user - and effectively obliterates the border between one such life and those of all other human beings.

Memory has a central role here as the mediator between material from the senses and non-experienced, conceptually transmitted experience. The steady flow of sensual perceptions does not remain immediately available to the consciousness, but is formed, shaped, weighed, measured, selected and placed in various narrative categories in memory. Into this historicization of one's own experiences, then, the external historical material must be incorporated - as an "as if" experience. It is in principle irrelevant whether the event one incorporates took place six hundred years ago or yesterday: it must in any case be worked into the individual user's language world and resonate with notions that are already processed, or *prefigured*, to use Hayden White's term from *Tropics of Discourse*. White is known (or notorious) for tearing down the dividing lines between historical and other narratives, so that "historical facts" are not available to us as such, only by taking place in a history, a narrative, and only in the form in which they participate in such a narrative. For the same reason, one may raise the question whether there is any difference at all between the various levels of text that I have moved between, other than the purely typographical; historical knowledge and the reminiscence of personal experience fuse, and any historical presentation also contains an element of metahistorical reflection.

As long as I cannot under any circumstance taste the apples that Adam loved so much, it should be irrelevant for me whether he liked them or not. When this can nevertheless become important - as is the case with the original soundscape of medieval music - it will be insofar as the leg in my understanding of reality which is not founded directly in my experiences, has authority for me.

A potential conflict as in (4), between the elements that decide my understanding of reality, i.e. between my experience of something and the "as if" experience that has been communicated to me through a historical transmission and interpretation, can be solved in different ways, depending on the degree of authority the various explanatory models have. Most fundamentally, since the language with(in) which I process these experiences is not my own but only on loan from the "other leg", there is no way I can escape its authority. I also live in a culture which uses history as a source for legitimization and self-realization. In some sense or the other, I *have* to relate to 1814, Norwegian grandeur, and Dolmetsch's beard.

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